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from the Author.

“ζωῆς τελείας χάριν καὶ αὐτάρκους.”

# ICELAND.

A POEM,

WHICH OBTAINED

THE CHANCELLOR'S MEDAL

AT THE

CAMBRIDGE COMMENCEMENT,

M. DCCC LXXV.

BY

GEORGE WILLIAM ROWNTREE,

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IN MEMORY OF  
WILLIAM HENRY SCHOFIELD  
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## ICELAND.

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"Ancients of the earth  
And in the morning of the times."

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**I**SLE of the Northmen, land of frost and flame,  
Fire-opal that for centuries untold  
Hast glistened on the forehead of old Earth,  
Be thou my theme!

By rock or rivulet,  
By tilth or tarn, by mountain or by mead,  
A land of marvels terribly serene  
And weirdly beauteous in its icy pride,  
Or when, as evening draws, the air is mute  
But for the sougning wave that laps the beach;  
The plover ceases piping to the hills;  
The sea-gull travels home on silent wing,  
While the pale gloaming tremulously soft  
Steals o'er the dales and roses every peak;  
Or, later, midnight with a far-off ray  
Tricks the cerulean starry-dimpled vault  
In bands of golden green; or where supreme  
Amid the trackless windy wilderness  
The wizard Winter rides upon the blast,  
And with his crystal wand relentlessly

Spell-binds the floods and fleecy cataracts 20  
 And silky rills down-sliding to the brooks;  
 Or where some dew-dark vale kissed by the dawn,  
 Stream-sundered, flings a fragrance to the breeze.  
 But round the sea-lulled shore, like sentinels,  
 Wide-shading summits scan the garish day  
 Veiled in a peaceful hoariness of snow,  
 Save where, with sudden roar precipitate,  
 The mass impending quits the polished crag,  
 And rushes to the plain; or lurking fires  
 From earth's deep-throated caverns hissing forth 30  
 Shoot molten rocks athwart the darkened skies,  
 And scorch the flats beneath: the torrent streams  
 Rave on, and rivers cease. Fit scene in sooth  
 To mark the labours of the grimy god—  
 His Northern labours—when from Ætna's isle  
 He goes, or hilly Lemnos, where he fell,  
 Hurl'd from Olympus, as the lava falls.

Such is the land. A thousand years ago,  
 What time the ruddy Viking swept the main,  
 And stemmed the rivers in his puny craft, 40  
 And sacked the shorelands with the ruthless sword,  
 And fired the waving corn—bold Naddodd's crew  
 Stressed by the storms of those inclement seas  
 Hailed it, an isle unknown, that in the lap  
 Lay of its parent Ocean, like a babe.  
 Then, too, the Fair-haired despot of the North,  
 Proud fierce and faithless, reared aloft his head  
 And made it sovereign. Whom the fiery chiefs,  
 Not brooking, spurned, an upstart, and colleague'd  
 Left their sweet homes, and busked them for the deep 50  
 To banishment self-doomed. A lordly train,  
 Kings of the earth and sons of kings were they,  
 The flower of all the Volsungs whose great deeds  
 Clashed through the Northland in the days of eld

When every son was braver than his sire.  
 Their fathers never to the yoke of Rome  
 Bent an obsequious neck, nor ever owned  
 That wide-compelling power, a Cæsar's sway :  
 But when the times were young, a restless horde  
 From Shinar and from Babel's citadel 60  
 Pressing to West and North with toilsome steps  
 Thro' long-drawn ages and slow lapse of years  
 To Norrøway they came, and swooping thence  
 On the besotted empire of the earth  
 Prevailed against it. So doth hardihood  
 O'ercome luxurious ease and manners soft  
 And pride of all but virtue. Thus of yore  
 With a brave few whom mountain gales had fed  
 The Persian won a realm, that in due time,  
 Snared in the meshes of silk-folded sloth, 70  
 Yielded in turn to that world-conqueror,  
 The youth of Pella. Thus did Rome herself  
 Raze the fair Punic city. But of these  
 The vaunt was high-born ancestry, the pride  
 Of nobleness that stoops to nought of base ;  
 Better be tillers of the soil that's free  
 Than princes and enslaved. There was an isle  
 Far-off, untrodden by the feet of men  
 Save theirs who found it, and it seemed to say,  
 "Come; here is pride and purity, and here 80  
 Is Nature sympathetic." So they sailed  
 Across the dark uncertain waves, and found  
 A land in harmony with all they felt  
 And thought and said, a likeness to the life,  
 Congenial spirits in the stately hills,  
 And pureness in the snows. Not otherwise  
 It seemed than if their homeland in the East  
 Had, sudden-plunging as they left the strand,  
 Kept pace beneath the billows, and emerged



On Thule's kindred shore. O loyal band,  
 O noble and magnanimous and true,  
 How fared ye, when for Liberty's dear sake,  
 Dearer than life, ye saw the long-loved seats  
 Fade on the dim horizon? Did no voice  
 Of her ye suffered for, no whispered word  
 Speak consolation from the years to come?  
 Did no sweet murmur prodigal of hope  
 Calm the tossed spirits of the banished brave?  
 And ye too, sons of England's younger self,  
 Say, shades of exiles, for ye can: arise,  
 Ye weary pilgrims to the setting sun,  
 And tell us all ye bore.

90

100

Thus circumstanced,  
 Hemmed in by all fair auspices, they grew,  
 Till every sturdy virtue, crushed before,  
 Sprang unimpeded to full utterance  
 And glassed itself in action. History  
 The great remembrancer of human deeds  
 Waxed, like a woven garment, with the years;  
 For deeds and struggles are as threads that weave  
 The tissues of our lives. And what are lives  
 But portions of historic woof? The throes  
 Of nations are the steps to future fame;  
 And acts are fair that are most nobly done,  
 Passing from age to age, and form a rule  
 Whereby to gauge the valour of the time.  
 Now too divinest poesy's bright star  
 Rose o'er the glancing ice-hills, and full soon  
 Song, peerless nymph, in all her maiden May,  
 Was wedded to the Sword. How should it be  
 Other than that amid such scenes as these,  
 Reared in wild Nature's innermost recess,  
 Fed upon such a lore in such a spot,  
 They bore a keenly spiritual race

110

120

Bold, watchful, eager, with the Athenian's wit  
 And courage like a Spartan? Various toil,  
 Labour uncast in spirit-warping grooves  
 That sap the soul with dull monotony,  
 But diverse, whatsoever things are done  
 By man's immortal mind in mortal frame,  
 These saved them from a torpor worse than death, 130  
 The brainless apathy of low desires  
 And intellects obscured. So then at first  
 With laws unwritten lived they, saving thus  
 As Conscience writes them in the brave man's heart,  
 Owning a simple faith, a creed expressed  
 In Nature first; but soon, as Nature waned,  
 Or seemed to wane, before imperial Thought,  
 New gods they made them of their own device,  
 Rulers of Nature, passions deified,  
 Self and the powers of self in many modes 140  
 With essences divine. 'Tis thus that men  
 Feel after God, if haply they may find,  
 And, failing, worship men. But ere the suns  
 Had run to twice a hundred cycles more,  
 A still small voice, that was not in the wind  
 Nor fire nor earthquake, whispered, and they saw  
 Truth in its utter loveliness, and life—  
 That strange mysterious riddle without God—  
 Gained a full meaning.

With such lives to-day  
 The shores are peopled, tho' the flinty sod 150  
 Scarce yields reluctant to the delver's toil;  
 Yet the stout fisher careless of his lot  
 Trolls the blue wave, or angles in the mere  
 To find a scanty meal; or slung perchance  
 Hair-girdled from some beetling precipice,  
 The cautious fowler plies his dizzy task  
 Spoiling the midway nest; or pale by night

The patient scholar pores upon his page,  
 Nor deems his fortune hard. 'Tis thus he thrives,  
 The toil-strung native of an icy sphere, 160  
 This scion of dead monarchs of the main,  
 Rich in the tenure of precarious life,  
 Wrestling it day by day from the stern clutch  
 Of niggard Nature. But his country's tale  
 Lives in his thoughts. No swift oblivion his ;  
 He revels in the lore of long ago ;  
 His heart is in the legendary past  
 Pulsing in concert with the living dead,  
 That live because remembered. Iceland's name  
 Blood-blazoned stains no world-historic page : 170  
 Hers is a glory of contented minds,  
 Of pure and simple lives and loyal hearts.  
 But self-dependent force, that inborn pride,  
 Which takes men scatheless thro' this work-day world,  
 Such is the God-gift of her sons. To this  
 All things have yielded and shall yield again.  
 'Twas this that made them spurn a tyrant's rule  
 And seek a foreign strand. 'Twas this alone  
 That pushed them forward thro' laborious years,  
 And sanctified by the Heaven-light vouchsafed 180  
 Lent tenfold vigour to the life, and last,  
 Wreathed with millennial splendour, from a king.  
 Received a royal tribute—counsels free—  
 Freedom of laws—self-government—a state  
 Threading alone the ways of polity.

And sure the dawning of a fairer day  
 Hath ushered freedom to the free before  
 In all but name—smile not in bitter scorn,  
 Ye lands that shimmer in the sunnier South,  
 Nor curl the writhing lip with hard disdain ; 190  
 True merit, steady purpose, boundless will  
 Reck not of Nature's scowl—a dawn whose light

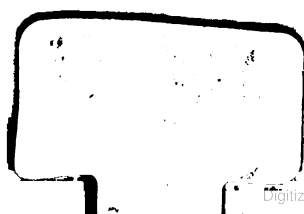
Paler perchance than where the tropic sun  
Pours from the zenith with no slanting ray,  
Paler perchance than where with dart inclined  
He strikes the furrows of the tempered zone,  
Yet bright with promise to the hopeful mind  
(And hopeful minds are mighty for great ends),  
And balmy with the breath of noble things,  
Shall grow, and shed a lustre on the world.













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